

Protect the Abuser

The Twelve Tribes sect defends its own -- aiding accused child molesters

)By [Eric Alan Barton](#) Thursday, Jun 3 2004

On a spring morning two years ago, [Kimberly Peck](#) saw something shocking in the hut where her daughters were sleeping. Peck, then a member of the Twelve Tribes religious cult, lived with her family in Quonset-style huts on a Central Florida compound. Her new husband, [Jeff Leonard](#), went over to her daughters' tent every morning to wake the girls, and that, she says, was when she witnessed the abuse firsthand.

As Peck watched in fear, 45-year-old Leonard began caressing one of the girls, kissing his stepdaughter intimately and rubbing his hands over places he shouldn't, she told authorities later. When he was finished, he moved over to her younger sister, Peck claims. Peck said she would've tried to stop it if she weren't so alone in the woods. Soon, Peck would learn how alone she was.

Peck spoke to her children, and all three of them -- two daughters and a son -- said they had been molested by their stepfather. Peck went to the elders in Twelve Tribes. She wanted justice. Instead, the tribe elders -- who claim to be so strict about carnal relations that couples found holding hands are forced to marry -- covered up the abuse and protected Leonard from criminal charges. They hid him at another of the cult's properties in Georgia, Peck says, with the concurrence of prosecutors and police.



Jeff Leonard, looking good in stripes

Peck fled from Twelve Tribes in part so she could see Leonard prosecuted. He is now in the [DeSoto County](#) Jail facing charges of sexual battery and lewd and lascivious acts, which could send him to prison for decades. Leonard may also face charges in [West Palm Beach](#), where Peck says he molested her son.

The case is one of two strikingly similar criminal investigations in Florida against members of the reclusive Twelve Tribes cult. Another tribe member, [David Drews](#), faces charges of fondling a girl at the cult's compound in West Palm Beach. The charges, if proved true, would seem to support claims by the group's many critics that Twelve Tribes often ignores child abuse and protects its members from criminal charges. Police and prosecutors in DeSoto County say the tribe's leaders ignored Peck's reports that her children had been assaulted and took efforts to hamper the criminal case. "Investigators have had difficulties with the Twelve Tribes," says [Lon Arend](#), the assistant state attorney prosecuting Leonard. "They have taken steps to impede the investigation."

The tribe's compound in [Arcadia](#) opened two years ago as the group began moving from its West Palm Beach location, which served as its Florida headquarters for the past five years. Only a couple of members still live in the West Palm compound off Southern Boulevard on Willis Road that consists of several modest brown buildings surrounded by a weed-filled yard. The group still plans to recruit members in South Florida, even after it closes the West Palm branch in the next few months. Twelve Tribes owns land in [Fort Myers](#), Orlando, and Highlands Beach, where members have actively recruited, mainly among devout religious organizations.

The Florida locations are among 22 facilities in the United States and 11 more across the globe, housing a total of about 3,000 members. The 30-year-old group is the brainchild of [Elbert Eugene Spriggs](#), a former factory executive and scoutmaster from Tennessee who now goes by the name Yoneq. Spriggs conceived of the organization after serving a stint as a carnival worker, where he says he saw sin firsthand and sought a life that would avoid it. Yoneq's whereabouts are known only to church elders, though there have been reports that he lives a lavish lifestyle in the Mediterranean.

The cult practices a mix of Christian and Jewish beliefs, celebrating both Sunday services and a Friday Sabbath with fireside dancing and a feast. Members must sign over all their possessions to join and are discouraged from independent thought that strays from Yoneq's biblical teachings. They claim to live simple and strictly devout lives, with little contact with the outside world, often in tents or trailers on remote farms or in communal homes. While members say they seek a life following the laws taught in the Bible, ex-members say leaders have corrupted that dream by tightening the rules, forcing women and young children into servitude and men into submission to elders.

Former members say the group helps converts hide their children from spouses, shuffling members to other locations to avoid criminal charges, and ignoring reports of child abuse. But members have rarely, if ever, been convicted of child abuse, despite rampant claims by ex-members, says [Bob Pardon](#), director of the [New England Institute of Religious Studies](#). One of the institute's missions is to expose cults. "This is the classic thought reform environment," Pardon says from his office in Massachusetts. "Members have little freedom." Former members say the abuse occurs because Twelve Tribes adults are encouraged to discipline children they have seen committing sin, often using resin-covered whips to administer punishment. Current tribe members deny these claims, saying that they spank only disobedient children.

The two Florida branches are run by four elders, including [Steve Nelson](#), who spoke of the abuse cases last week while sitting under an oak tree at the Arcadia compound. The abuse allegations are a test from God, Nelson says. "The very reason our God had us come together is so that we can help each other," says the [Vietnam](#) veteran, a member for 22 years. "We will help these men get through this."

Nelson, an intense, bearded man who speaks with obvious conviction, says that the tribe confronted Leonard and that he confessed to having thoughts of molesting the children. But Nelson says Leonard denied touching them, so the tribe decided against bringing him to authorities. Instead, it sent Leonard to live on a tribe-owned ship called the Avany in [Brunswick](#), Georgia, where he worked in the group's boat repair business.

Peck told investigators she tried to divorce Leonard about six months after she reported the abuse. Tribe members told her they had made the decision that she could not get a divorce and that she should join her husband in Georgia, according to court documents. Peck fled the tribe and now lives in North Florida.

Like the Leonard case, the West Palm Beach charges stem from the claims of a 6-year-old girl who says she was abused by 25-year-old David Drews. The girl told investigators Drews began sexually assaulting her the day her family moved into the tribe's West Palm Beach compound in 2001 and continued until they left months later. Drews lived in the room next door and fondled the girl during games of hide-and-seek, she told investigators. Afraid to report the abuse to tribe elders, the girl instead told her story in February to a counselor with the Department of Children and Families.

A [Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office](#) detective questioned Drews on May 13, and according to court documents, he confessed to molesting the girl. A judge agreed earlier this month to release Drews on house arrest, but he's still being held at the [Palm Beach County Jail](#) waiting for paperwork to be processed.

Meanwhile, in an Arcadia courtroom last week, Leonard asked [Circuit Court Judge James S. Parker](#) to release him on bail before his trial. Like others in Twelve Tribes, Leonard wore his jet-black hair in a short ponytail, and his scraggly beard nearly touched his chest. He told the judge that tribe members would likely post his bail. "I have limited assets -- a van, tools," he said. "By our beliefs, we hold all things in common."

The judge agreed to set a \$250,000 bail for Leonard. Tribe elder Nelson says members haven't decided whether to post the bail, since they would likely have to put up some of the tribe's property as collateral. As Nelson spoke, several members worked in the blazing afternoon sun building what looked like a drainage ditch to the goat pen, and a woman in an Amish-style dress brought them water in a bucket. Nelson said the tribe will help members like Leonard face their sin. "He had come to the place where he had surrendered himself to God, Yeshua, so we will always help him," Nelson said. "It seemed he [Leonard] was being very up-front and honest about his situation."

As for whether to post the bail, Nelson said the answer will come with prayer. "It is not like we hear voices out of heaven," he said. "We know God speaks to his followers and gives his wisdom to many counselors, so we will listen to him on this matter."